



THE TOUR D'AFRIQUE

Tour d'Afrique lives up to its name: a ride across the entire continent of Africa. It's tough on the bike and gruelling on the body.

Through stinging beads of sweat I looked ahead and the road shimmered into the distance – a thin grey line with endless plains of sand on either side. We'd cycled 50 miles (80km) so far and had the same distance to go. The sun was beating down, and the desert wind was relentless. It was like riding into a hairdryer. With added grit. What a crazy place to go cycling.

This was my first day on the Tour d'Afrique, a long-distance race from Cairo to Cape Town, Africa's traditional northern and southern extremities. This annual test of endurance covers around 7500 miles (around 12,000km) divided into eight stages of 14 days, giving four months to ride the continent end-to-end. And while some pedal the whole distance, those with less time can ride just a stage – which is no mean feat in itself. There's also a team relay option, and in 2009 I was part of a Lonely Planet team, with two riders completing each stage then handing on the baton.

The Tour d'Afrique starts at one of Africa's best-known landmarks, the Pyramids of Giza, on the edge of Cairo. After obligatory photos in front of the giant monuments, and one for luck in front of the Sphinx, the peloton heads south to begin its epic journey. Route details change each year, as new roads are built or borders close, or when countries become too volatile to visit, but the Tour d'Afrique follows pretty much the same overall pattern. From the Egyptian capital, riders head to the Red Sea then follow the coast road before tracking inland to reach the Nile Valley and cycle through a landscape of palm trees and crop fields that have barely changed since Pharaonic times.

A ferry ride along Lake Nasser brings the riders to their second country, Sudan, and a demanding few days on sandy roads



